

CARNATIONS

Michèle Thériault



These texts accompany the
exhibition

CARNATIONS

Philippe Hamelin

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Curator

Michèle Thériault

These processes of spawning and molting, entirely computer-generated and presented on separate screens, are part of Montreal artist Philippe Hamelin's most recent series of works, entitled *Vivariums* (2017). Biotope enthusiasts will be familiar with these glass cages that imitate an animal's natural habitat, and will also know that, more often than not, the price of observing a mantis or tarantula is the fact that the creature refuses to put on a show. In transposing this structure into the potentially infinite space of computer-generated imagery (CGI), Hamelin has created a sort of meta-vivarium: an ecosystem of animated images that both puts on display and questions its own dynamics, between the subject and object of seeing, the artificial and the organic, the baring of intimacy and the withdrawal into riddle. This essay aims to map out the incongruous but rigorous logic of such an ecosystem, beyond these eponymous works, through the pieces presented on the occasion of Hamelin's solo exhibition at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

Space Reigns Supreme

Ji-Yoon Han

Barely distinguishable from the milky-coloured background, a visibly pregnant, irregularly shaped blob wriggles and contracts, its unseeing orifice slowly dilating and pushing out a glimmer of pinkish mother-of-pearl, followed by the beginnings of a rounded form. This protracted spawning culminates with the ejection of a glossy, otherworldly larvae, while not far off, a sort of pod, also white, gradually splits along its length in a long moulting process. In its opening shell lies an oblong fruit—unless it is some sort of bladder, or a chrysalis emerging from its cocoon. Although it remains perfectly still, this organism, clearly in mutation, emits flashes resembling the Northern Lights, as if carrying within itself the shimmering seed of future wings or scales.

These processes of spawning and moulting, entirely computer-generated and presented on separate screens, are part of Montreal artist Philippe Hamelin's most recent series of works, entitled *Vivariums* (2017). Biodome enthusiasts will be familiar with these glass cages that imitate an animal's natural habitat, and will also know that, more often than not, the price of observing a mantis or tarantula is the fact that the creature refuses to put on a show. In transposing this structure into the potentially infinite space of computer-generated imagery (CGI), Hamelin has created a sort of meta-vivarium: an ecosystem of animated images that both puts on display and questions its own dynamics, between the subject and object of seeing, the artificial and the organic, the baring of intimacy and the withdrawal into riddle. This essay aims to map out the incongruous but rigorous logic of such an ecosystem, beyond these eponymous works, through the pieces presented on the occasion of Hamelin's solo exhibition at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

When observing living things, the key is patience and attentiveness to detail. The same is true for Hamelin's works, as the 3D animation techniques he employs couldn't be more unlike the feverish special effects of video games and Hollywood blockbusters. Through a meticulous reconstruction of the most detailed textures and movements of organic life, these animations allow for an entirely different type of immersion that, by way of slowness, repetition and looping, gives rise to bodily sensations of latency, hypnosis and even torpor in the viewer. Out of these artificial paradises, metaphors for the psyche, sometimes flashes an apparition, hallucination or mirage. In the monotony of a polyhedron spinning in front of a variegated background, something comes undone, suddenly gesticulates, demands to be looked at—as if you had made eye contact with the glimmering gaze of a reptile hiding in the shadows.

The asymmetrical form featured in *Camouflage bureaucratique (prédateur)* (2013) doesn't, however, limit itself to mechanical spinning. Its decelerations, accelerations and off-balanced axis of rotation—indeed, everything in its round-about course—seem to be calculated to attract, and perhaps entrap the eye. This illusion is reinforced by wormlike motifs covering both the gyrating object and the background, and flowing out of the digital realm to a wallpaper covering the very real wall of the exhibition space. These patterns mimic the security markings on the inside of envelopes that both protect content and suggest its presence: a camouflage that hides through showing, and that seizes the gaze in its optical vertigo while holding a mirror up to it, in the manner of a Rorschach test. *Tell me what you see and I will (maybe) tell you who you are.* Now, it is no longer clear *what* is spinning. The polyhedron? My eye? Or perhaps the striated space of which they are both but moving reflections? Who can state with certainty that the difference between the animate and the inanimate, the virtual and the real, is one of degree, and not of essence?

It is precisely this confusion that Roger Caillois analyzes in his reflections on animal mimicry, of which camouflage is one of the primary manifestations. This confusion pertains to the distinction between the organism and its habitat: in his 1935 article "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", Caillois defines mimicry as "a real *temptation by space*", that is, a process of "*depersonalization by assimilation to space*".¹ To *imitate the other* thus embodies a *becoming-other* giving rise to both a loss of individuality and a convergence between the living and the lifeless. For Caillois, this law of metamorphosis applies not only to the animal kingdom, but also to what human psychology identifies as personality disorders, as well as to the mimetic strategies induced by artistic activity. While forms and their environment in Hamelin's works generally share the same digital nature, there is no escaping from the muddling of identity that the object presents to me. *I don't know what I am seeing.*

Camouflage is thus the manifestation of a desire to escape from the grip of identity. *To no longer be oneself*: loss of life force, fusion with surrounding space, trance, *ek-stasis* (a going outside of oneself). Such metamorphic states, where the organism is already both itself and an other, are to be found throughout the *Vivariums'* spawning and moulting processes. Likewise, the ceaseless roundabout and contagious delirium of *Les amis (à l'infini)* (2014/2017) bring about a similar dissolution of individuality. The more one is taken over by this effervescent fever and its monotonous throbbing, the more the distinguishing features of these glowing, purple-maned, sleepwalking bodies seem to shed, leaving only remains, dead

1. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" [1935], trans. John Shepley, *October*, vol. 31 (Winter 1984), 28, 30. Caillois developed his reflections on mimicry notably in *Méduse et Cie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1960), published in English as *The Mask of Medusa* (New York, C.N. Potter, 1964).

husks emptied of all substance. These bodies are deformed in their awkward dance, in turn swelling, becoming excited and flattened, at times melting into the background and reproducing themselves from one projection to another, like cells in an acid-coloured plasma-space for which they have become, like Caillois's schizophrenics, "the convulsive possession".²

This resembles. Nothing. It only resembles. This self-contained resemblance, designed to disorient the gaze, is underpinned by a mechanism shared by all the works in the exhibition: transit, transfer, transposition—dislocations that initiate and accompany metamorphosis. One of the works in the *Sci Fi Haïkus* series, indeed entitled *Translation* (2012), presents an alternation between 3D animation and videotaped sequences that gives rise to effects of transfer and mutual contamination. This infinitely porous movement between forms and mediums privileges the production of what Walter Benjamin, during the same period as Caillois, called "non-sensuous similarity": existing outside of identity-based resemblance, this is the immemorial human capacity to activate correspondence throughout the natural orders, so as to grasp the the ungraspable, the unconnected, and to "to read what was never written".³

Scène 2 (découpage) (2014-2017) presents the opportunity to use this capacity for the purpose of *mediation*. At first, this work seems to be an unsolvable puzzle: a CGI animation explores a landscape of scarlet meat resting on a light-coloured fur surface; a video probes the rush of water taken from the deck of a ferry; the two projections are played in succession, accompanied by an orchestral soundtrack interspersed with silent pauses. Some viewers will recognize the original

2. Ibid., 30.

3. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" [1933], trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), 722. The adage quoted by Benjamin is originally from Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

soundtrack to Godard's *Contempt*, others will instinctively feel the sun-drenched sensuality of the music. Confronted with this especially baffling installation, one must take on the role of the haruspex, those diviners of Antiquity that read in the entrails of slaughtered animals. Without being able to predict the future, I, for one, perceive what I might boldly call a vivisection of the scopic drive: it is the very *desire to see*, vector of all visual perception, that is here brought down to its fundamental state of lifeless meat and primordial bubbling.

A comparable dismantling of the gaze is described by Jacques Lacan in his commentary on the anamorphosis used by Hans Holbein in his iconic painting *The Ambassadors* (1533): in breaking with the continuity of representation, the formless outline floating in the lower part of the painting opens up a space outside the linear geometry of perspective, a labyrinth characterized by what Lacan calls "the point of light—the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth."⁴ The viewer is thus forced to avert her eyes from the painting and give up on solving its riddle in such a way that, in the interval of a sideways glance, this anomaly might transform itself into the image of a skull. Likewise, the animated sequence in *Scène 2 (découpage)* unfolds according to a singularly serpentine, almost tangible visual movement: the cluster of meat is approached from the side, slowly, almost hesitantly, and examined along its entire length, as if being *sniffed by the eyes* in a back-and-forth caressing movement. This visual exploration is punctuated by coloured filters that mask the meat while unveiling a relief or texture.—And this

4. Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 94. It is certainly no accident that Lacan developed his theory of the gaze through his own reading of Caillois' research on animal mimicry.

5. For this piece, Hamelin in fact meticulously reconstructed the lighting and camera movement from the second scene of *Contempt*. Nevertheless, the idea here is not so much to cite Godard's film, but rather to use it as a *mask*, the riddle of which is only hinted at.

mesmerizing soundtrack that leads you, almost against your will, to follow the undulating path of this loving gaze...⁵

Hamelin transforms the gridded space of computer-generated imagery into a labyrinth, a shimmering wellspring of intensities where everything seems to be able to turn itself inside-out as easily as a glove, transforming into an *other*. This is a space with neither outside nor inside: an in-between space, a *milieu* where ambiguity, semblance and simulacrum reign supreme. In this interstice, Hamelin's artworks move about of their own will, like points of light in a constellation reconfiguring itself over time, as if the artist wished them to be ever open to influx and cross-contamination. Indeed, from one exhibition to the next, Hamelin's works multiply and divide, sometimes amputating and fragmenting themselves, only to eventually come back together, much like those mimetic animals that are able to adapt from one vivarium to another, and take on the contours of their surrounding space. Such plasticity surely stems from the desire for nothing to remain fixed and stationary, so that, ultimately, *space might reign supreme*.⁶

Translated from the French by Simon Brown

6. The phrase that provides the title of the present essay, "space reigns supreme" (*l'espace règne*), is borrowed from art historian Elie Faure, excerpts of whose writings Jean-Paul Belmondo reads in the opening of Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*: a starting point, from which I have chosen to flow and doubtlessly dissemble.

Liminal Spaces

Michèle Thériault

The opening of Godard's *Contempt* (1963) offers the spectator a triple layering: a tracking shot in which one watches the actual movement of the camera on rails, the cameraman at work, boom operator in tow as they follow their subject, the actress Georgia Moll (playing Francesca), while at the same time the filmmaker recites the opening credits. The shot ends with the camera turned and aimed at the viewer/camera—the other one, the real one—documenting what we have seen in a still shot. An extremely compact and effective reflexive encounter of a narrative to come: reality and fiction, authorship, speech, image, context, labour and reception.

What occurs in those few minutes is an imbrication of different modes of the real in filmmaking, or, simply put, of different ways of projecting that confound the limit between the made up and the concrete and physical realm of the apparatus of production and experience. We are at a juncture, tottering between the *here* of our viewing and the *there* of the staged drama that Godard and his team construct for us. The technical apparatus, indeed the very economy of filmmaking, is transformed into a subject; the smooth passage into the unreal, the imaginary and the surrender to desire is complicated.

CARNATIONS is not an exhibition as *mise en abyme* as *Contempt* is in many ways. It also is not film, but it does play with boundaries between the inside and the outside, reality and artificiality, and, in particular in the case of animation, reality and mimesis. The works more specifically further explore the general question of how body and psyche, as they interface with technology, apprehend and negotiate not only the real, but what constitutes the human and our constitution as subjects.

Of interest in Godard's approach for the construction that is the exhibition—indeed this exhibition—is the resistance applied to seamlessly plunging the spectator into the realm of cinematic fiction, into a narrative of tragically baffled desire. It insists on keeping the spectator from smoothly relating to or falling into a single unique space and points to many other spaces as well as degrees of experience and cognition. For a few moments, the gaze is made investigative and analytical. A distance is imposed on the spectator whose space of viewing is made to expand. In the following shot, it will have shifted with the space retracting into scene two of the film where the camera tracks Brigitte Bardot/Camille's body as it lies naked on the bed in the arms of her lover Michel Piccoli/Paul.

Philippe Hamelin's animation *Scène 2 (découpage)* (2014-17) refers to that very sequence. But here we are confronted by a red mass, voluptuously meat-like, resting on a fur-like white surface, being examined and revealed through various camera angles (reproducing the ones that dissect Bardot's body from foot to head in the film) as a pathos-filled orchestral soundtrack plays. The only identification that takes place here rises inchoate from our unconscious to form a web of human, animal, mineral, sensorial and affective associations. As the red mound recedes and the music continues, a small irregularly shaped plane of moving water appears in a projection on the wall immediately to the right, accentuating the atomization of one's faculty of cognition. To experience *Scène 2* is to be propelled into a series of spaces with no possible common ground. This lack, however, does not diminish the pull the animated field has on us—the viscosity and strange sensuality of it—in creating a state of liminality.

In cultural anthropology, liminality is the indeterminate state that is produced in a person in the process of moving from one stage to another, typically in the context of a rite

of passage.¹ Conceived and operating at the edge of incorporation, I would like to suggest that Hamelin's animations also hold the viewer in this indeterminate state, a space of a quasi-suspension where a fully realized passage or incorporation fails to take place (unlike in a rite of passage, of course, where there is a resolve and one moves into another state). In occupying this in-between state, however the very nature of digital animation, the technology of making live or producing life through movement in relation to reality, is closely examined.

Each of the three works in the series *Sci Fi Haikus* (2012-17) are structured in the same way. Like the Japanese poetic form, they are short, concise and evocative. A video segment of an event in the natural world (an aviary filled with agitated and screeching birds, a frontal view of rail tracks as a train speedily advances, a horizontal segment of a torso breathing in and out) alternates with an animation of two white prisms floating in a black void in a series of movements that ends in their unification. Unlike the multi-angled continuous presentation of the red mass with its enveloping romantic musical score, the *Haikus* adopt a frontal take of a privileged scene abruptly and repeatedly interrupted by two moving white geometric forms. It is impossible to reconcile these juxtapositions, which are defined by a radical difference of order.

1. The concept of liminality was introduced by the French folklorist and ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 1900s and then further developed by the British, then American anthropologist Victor Turner in the mid-twentieth century. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [1909], trans. Monika V. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de passages*," in *The Forest of Symbols*;

Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111 and "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [1969], (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94-130. Contemporary applications of liminality are discussed in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

In this liminal situation, the question of what firmly inhabits reality and the unity of being are addressed: the animate and inanimate may be made to coexist and a kind of merging of the two orders suggested at the end of each *Haiku*, but their realization remains suspended, their spaces impassable. What is left to operate is what lies outside the rational domain: affective disturbance at the violence and excess the screeching birds express; anxiety and foreboding as we visually ride the rail track; corporeal hyper-consciousness of breath regulated by the one emanating from the resting torso. These external and internal agitations are, at short intervals, countered by the smooth, hyper-defined prisms ominously travelling in silence through the black void. For a moment, they meld with the sound of the birds, the rumbling of the train and the intake of breath, and a threshold is almost crossed.

CARNATIONS as a whole compounds a series of spaces as environments and temporal experiences where liminality occurs, thus challenging the boundary of the space of exhibition. Indeed, the gallery's very antechamber or vestibule has been metamorphosed into a colored environment bathing the visitor in a reddish glow. This is the only intermediate space where a transit is actually realized, a threshold crossed from the outside of the gallery into the large space where *Les amis (à l'infini)* (2014/2017) occupies the large expanse of wall. The frenzied, abandoned dancing of the group to a techno beat is continuous with no possible respite. Their technicolor, sightless bodies, capable of unnatural torsions, tears and gestures mesmerize us with their connectedness. Identification is sensorial and emotional, but remains unengaged, the obvious disembodiment fascinatingly repelling. The space one occupies as a viewer, in spite of its immersiveness, is the tenuous interface where recognition and identification are possible, but only as an incomplete externalized force.

Vivariums (2017) articulate a temporal experience of a different order in presenting us with animations of transformations that mimic animal life processes such as birthing

and moulting (classic forms of rites of passage). Displayed on screens embedded in a large prism-like wall construction, organic-like forms are made to slowly expel a worm-like "being" or open up to reveal a scintillating elongated pod. The action unfolds in real time and thus the visitor can only witness very slight changes in a normal viewing experience. *Vivariums* locate experience at the very point where animation exercises its pull on reality, confounding the order of the real, seducing us by assimilation to its space and effects, while disorienting our subjectivity.

If the space of exhibition mines its boundary by way of a series of spaces that afford liminal experiences, it is because Hamelin's animations produce constant dis-localizations effected not only by the ambiguity of the carefully constructed digital worlds, but also by the way they are displayed across five interconnected galleries and how they relate to each other. It is played out in how each work configures space and inhabits the walls, how these walls interrupt or frame, in the image's expanse or containment, in its location in proximity or distance, in how viewing is positioned, in the type of sound and its intensity (techno beat, orchestral and ambient) and in the degree of light and darkness.

Dis-localization is then constructive of *CARNATIONS*, unfixing the relationship to place, declassifying order and unmooring the process of identification. In doing so, it initiates an open process of inquiry for the visitor into what digital technology's mediation transmits sensorially, emotionally and intellectually to the structuring of the real. The distinction of categories is mined by way of an environment that exceeds the works themselves in order to confound the category of space that is name "gallery".

Liminality and dis-localization can be considered as processes that define the space of a place of exhibition and programming such as the Ellen whose status is never tamely embedded in the cultural whole. It seems to belong tenuously and uncomfortably to that larger cultural system. Indeed,

this also the reality of its often, awkward relationship with the university. Neither academic department nor curriculum bound or dispenser of degrees what exactly is its role and function? However, this is exactly where a university art gallery should locate its practice within the unstable ground of indeterminacy and the distancing associated with a redirecting or overturned gaze.

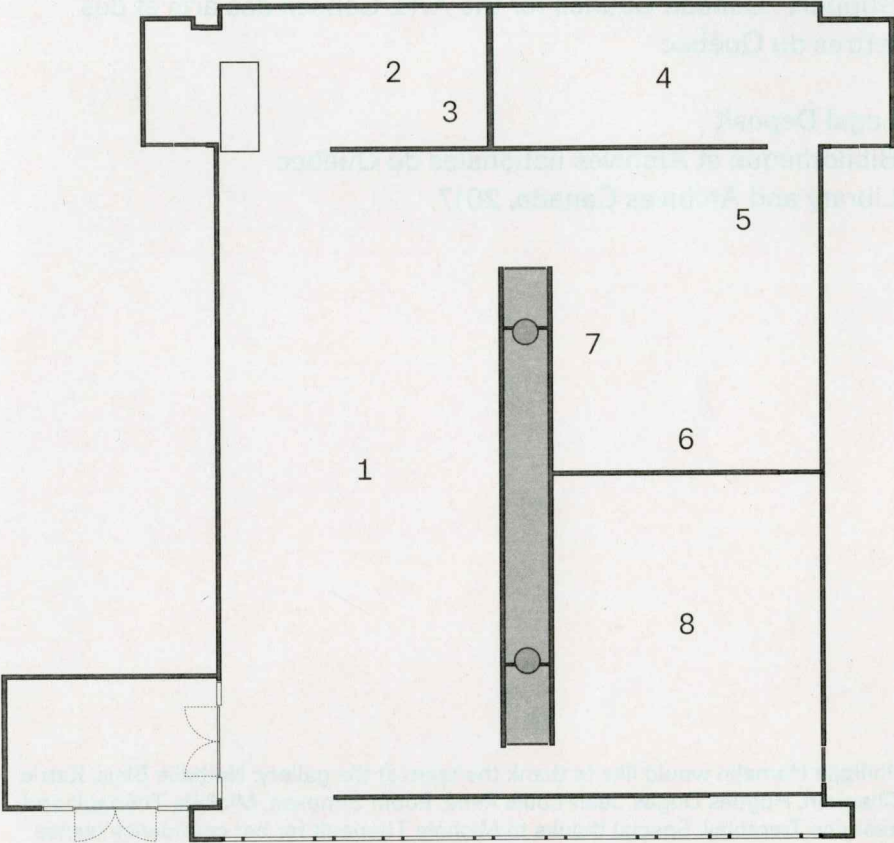
List of Works

1. *Les amis (à l'infini)*, 2014,
multichannel version, 2017
Computer generated
animation, sound
Video projection
Courtesy of the artist
2. *Jungle*, 2013, ambient
version, 2017
Printed vinyl
Courtesy of the artist
3. *Camouflage*
bureaucratique (prédateur),
2013
Computer generated
animation
LCD screen
Courtesy of the artist
4. *Vivariums*, 2017
Computer generated
animations
LCD screens
Courtesy of the artist
5. *Sci Fi Haïkus*, 2012-
"Point de fuite," 2017
Computer generated
animation, video, sound
Video projection
Courtesy of the artist
6. *Sci Fi Haïkus*, 2012-
"Expiration," 2017
Computer generated
animation, video, sound
Video projection
Courtesy of the artist

7. *Sci Fi Haikus*, 2012-
"Translation," 2012
Computer generated
animation, video, sound
Video projection
Courtesy of the artist

8. *Scène 2 (découpage)*,
2014-2017
Computer generated
animation, video, sound
Video projections
Courtesy of the artist

Exhibition Floor Plan



Design : Karine Cossette

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